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EPA pushes alternative commute options

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With half their 480 headquarters employees being East Bay residents, officials of PMI Mortgage Insurance Co. decided this side of the Bay was a more logical place for their main office.

But when they considered a move from mass-transit-friendly downtown San Francisco where the company had been for 30 years - they knew it had to be in a spot convenient to trains and buses, as well as having sufficient parking to accommodate carpools and vanpools.

"Finding a location close to BART was very important," said Charles Broom, senior vice president of human resources at PMI. "It had to be in a place accessible by transit from San Francisco, where about 25 percent of our employees live, as well as other parts of the East Bay."

Two months ago, PMI moved to 3003 Oak Road in Walnut Creek, across from the Pleasant Hill BART station.

"People from San Francisco who used to commute to our offices on Muni now take BART," Broom said. "Many of our employees who live in places like Fremont and Castro Valley who used to ride BART into San Francisco still take the train to Walnut Creek."

Thanks to its unusually high level of transit consciousness, PMI has been named one of the Bay Area's "Best Workplaces for Commuters" by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. It's one of 83 employers throughout the nine-county region to get such recognition. Thirty of those are in Alameda and Contra Costa counties. No Solano County firms made the list.

East Bay employers ranged from

public agencies such as the cities of Berkeley, Pleasanton and San Ramon to UC-Berkeley, the Metropolitan Transportation Commission and the East Bay Municipal Utility District. Besides PMI, private companies on the list include ChevronTexaco Corp. in San Ramon, Pixar Animation Studios in Emeryville, PeopleSoft Inc. in Pleasanton, Roche Molecular Systems Inc. in Alameda, Trust Administrators Inc. in Oakland, Integrated Science Solutions Inc. in Walnut Creek and Kaiser Permanente's Northern California regional office in Oakland.

Robin Snyder, who coordinates the Bay Area's Commuter Choice Initiative program for the EPA, said this region is part of a pilot program called the Charter Cities Campaign, which aims to improve the percentage of workers using alternative commute methods. That includes taking mass transit, riding in carpools or vanpools, riding a bike, walking or roller skating - anything besides driving solo.

Philadelphia and the Denver and Boulder areas in Colorado are also in the pilot program.

"We chose the Bay Area for this program not only because the area has major traffic congestion, but also because it has such an impressive public transit infrastructure," Snyder said.

Not many people know that system better than James Paxson, general manager of the Hacienda Business Park Owners Association - another employer on the "best workplaces" list. Paxson and many of the park's tenant companies have worked to encourage commute alternatives among Hacienda's 18,500 employees, as well as the 4,500

people who live in housing developments within the 865-acre park in north Pleasanton.

"All of our employees and residents have free access to Wheels buses, whether on a work day or on the weekends," Paxson said.

The result is impressive for a sprawling business park in auto-driven suburbia. Paxson said about 14 percent of Hacienda's employees travel in carpools or vanpools, while 20 percent to 25 percent use buses, regularly or occasionally. Tenant California Indemnity Insurance Co. has more than one-third of its employees in carpools or vanpools.

"We have lots of programs to promote alternative commuting," he said. "All of our buildings are required to install carpool and vanpool spaces. We have bicycle racks and bike pathways throughout the park. We work closely with (RIDES for Bay Area Commuters Inc. in Oakland) to coordinate carpools and vanpools, and participate in the 'guaranteed ride home' program offered by Alameda County."

Hacienda employees also have the Commuter Check program, which offers those who take public transportation to work \$100 in federal tax-free payments through their employers.

PMI's Broom has become a carpooler himself.

"Being so accessible to public transportation is a real competitive advantage for our company when it comes to recruiting," Broom said. "I hope other companies realize that, too. I think all the employers in this area should do as much as they can to get more people off the road."